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ABSTRACT

Testimony presenting the views of Hispanic community organizations supports proposed federal legislation focusing on early childhood education programs. Education is the single most important issue listed in surveys of the Hispanic community. The reasons for this concern include the following: (1) Hispanics comprise the largest and youngest school population group; (2) Hispanics are the most undereducated major population group; and (3) there is an acute shortage of high quality early childhood education programs and child care services to meet the needs of low-income working parents. The reasons why this legislation is important to the Hispanic community are that it seeks to do the following: (1) prevent early enrollment below grade level (usually caused by a child's failure to pass to the next grade level); (2) lower the droupout rate; and (3) improve educational attainment. Recommendations to improve the program include the following: (1) staff should be trained in second language acquisition methods and multicultural education; (2) parents should be involved; (3) the composition of the State Task Force and the Local Policy Group should reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the affected populations; and (4) data should be collected on the race and ethnicity of all children receiving services or waiting for services. (FMW)

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TESTIMONY ON

SMART START: THE COMMUNITY COLLABORATIVE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT ACT OF 1988

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Before the
Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Arturo Vargas and I am the Senior Education Policy Analyst at the National Council of La Raza, one of the largest national Hispanic organizations. The National Council of La Raza exists to improve life opportunities for Americans of Hispanic descent and is a private, nonprofit organization representing over 80 local Hispanic community-based organizations serving 32 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to express our views on S. 2270, "Smart Start: The Community Collaborative for Early Childhood Development Act of 1988."

Education is perhaps the single most important issue for Hispanics; it almost always tops the list of concerns in surveys of the Hispanic community. There is little wonder why this is so. A larger proportion of Hispanics than either Whites or Blacks are either in school, should be in school, are about to enter school, or have children of school age. Hispanics are also the most undereducated major U.S. population group, experiencing a cycle of undereducation that begins in the earliest grades. In addition, there is an acute shortage of high quality early childhood education programs and child care services to meet the needs of low-income working parents. Any initiative that concerns children, and certainly almost every education initiative, disproportionately affects the Hispanic community. This is why the "Smart Start Act of 1988" is of particular interest to the National Council of La Raza and its national network. No major population group would be more affected by "Smart Start" than the Hispanic community.

II. HISPANIC DEMOGRAPHICS

Hispanics are a growing population. Census data for March 1987 showed that the Hispanic population had increased by 30% since 1980, a growth rate about five times that of the rest of the U.S. population. In March 1987, Hispanics comprised 7.9% of the total U.S. population, compared to 6.8% in 1982.

The fertility rate of Hispanic women has declined slightly during this decade, but is still higher than that of White or Black women. In 1986, the overall U.S. fertility rate was 70.3 births per 1,000 women 18 to 44 years old, compared to 105.6 births per 1,000 Hispanic women in that age group. Approximately 12% of all births in June 1986 were to Hispanic women. We can expect large cohorts of children in the immediate future since the Hispanic fertility rate is still well above "replacement" levels.

Hispanics are by far the youngest group in the United States, with a median age of 25.1 years versus 32.6 years for non-Hispanics. There were more than 6.1 million Hispanic children under the age of 18 in 1987 and nearly one-third of them (1.9 million) were under the age of five. In 1986, 10.9% of Hispanics were under five years of age, compared to 9.5% of Blacks and 7.3% of Whites. In 1987, about half of Hispanic children under 18 (2.8 million) had working mothers. Almost three-fourths of these children (4.3 million) were living with both parents and had mothers (2.1 million children) who worked outside the home. The proportion of Hispanic women in the work force has increased from 40% to 50% in the past 15 years, and is expected to continue to increase at a rapid rate. These data indicate that the need for high quality, affordable child care and early childhood education programs will also grow rapidly in coming years.

Affordability is a major concern. We are all aware of projections that most of the new jobs created in the remainder of this century will be service jobs, many of them low-paid. Moreover, Hispanics -- especially Hispanic women -- are currently concentrated in low-skill, low-paid positions. Hispanic family income registered no substantial gains during the first half of this decade, and the gap between Hispanic and White family income has been widening for 15 years. In 1972, Hispanic median family income was 71% of White income, in 1980 it was down to 67%, and in 1986 to 65%. The 1986 median family income for Hispanics was $19,995, well below the $30,809 reported for White families and 5% below Hispanic real income in 1978.

Poverty rates for Hispanics remain very high. According to Census figures, the number of Hispanic families below the poverty level in 1986 was 24% higher than in 1981; nearly one-fourth (24.7%) of Hispanic families were poor in 1986. Stark differences are found among Hispanic subgroups; Puerto Rican families had a poverty rate of 38.1%, compared to 24.9% for Mexican Americans, and 13.3% for Cubans.

A key variable which affects the incidence of poverty is the number of families headed by women. Minority families with female heads of household are especially vulnerable to poverty. In 1986, 23.4% of Hispanic-origin families were maintained by women, compared to 16.2% of all U.S. female-headed families. More than half (51.2%) of these lived below the poverty level, compared to 34.6% of all U.S. families. Furthermore, two-thirds (66.7%) of Hispanic children in female-headed families were poor, as were 67.1% of Black children, and 46.3% of White children from female-headed households. Overall, 37.1% of all Hispanic children lived in poverty in 1986, compared to 42.7% of Black children and 15.3% of White children. Poor

families cannot afford to purchase high quality child care, and yet the lack of available care contributes to their continued poverty.

III. EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Education is perhaps the key determinant of employment opportunities, and Hispanics are the most undereducated major population group. In 1986, 11.9% of Hispanics over 25 years of age had completed less than five years of schooling, compared to only 1.8% of the total non-Hispanic population. National studies suggest that up to 56% the Hispanic adults can be considered to be functionally illiterate. As of 1987, only 50.9% of Hispanics 25 years of age and over had completed four years of high school or more, compared to 63.4% of Blacks and 77.0% of Whites. The median number of school years completed by Hispanics as of 1987 was 12.0, compared to 12.4 for Blacks and 12.7 for Whites. The dropout rate for Hispanics remains the highest for any major United States subpopulation, estimated at 45-50%, and is over 70% in some large urban areas.

Early school failure has been shown to be perhaps the greatest predictor of a child's later dropping out of school. Children who are significantly older than the average age for a given grade are said to be enrolled below grade level. Such enrollment may result from a number of factors, but most frequently it is caused by a child's "failing" a grade and being kept back to repeat it. The percentage of Hispanics enrolled below grade level increases steadily and is alarmingly higher than for Whites. For example, in 1984 28% of Hispanics in grades one through four were enrolled below grade level, compared to 21% for Whites. In grades five through eight, 39.5% of Hispanics were enrolled below grade level, compared to 26.9% for Whites. By grades nine through ten, the rate for Hispanics was 43.1%, compared to 26.3% for Whites.

Early school failure is a problem for both English-proficient and limited-English proficient Hispanic children. However, limited-English proficient children are at higher risk of early school failure.

The statistics on limited-English proficient children have important implications for Hispanics and for early childhood education programs. According to national studies*, the number of school-aged children of non-English language backgrounds is expected to increase 40% by the year 2000, a more rapid increase than for children in the general population. The number of Spanish-language-background children is projected to grow at an even higher rate of 55%. Given this projected increase, and given the importance of language-appropriate programs at very early stages in a child's education, the availability of such programs must also grow if these children are to progress successfully through their academic careers.

Several studies of early childhood education programs, such as the Perry Preschool in Michigan, indicate that the programs' impact on poor children is positive in both the short- and long-term. The studies reveal that children enrolled in these programs achieve greater intellectual and social performance as they begin school and achieve greater socioeconomic success later in life. For example, participants in these programs are likely to have more advanced literacy skills and are more likely to earn high school diplomas, to be employed, and to go on to college.

IV. IMPORTANCE OF "SMART START" PROGRAMS

These data make it clear that the "Smart Start" bill is of special concern to Hispanics, who constitute a large and growing proportion of the bill's target population. The Hispanic population is younger and growing

*Waggoner, Dorothy, "Estimates of the Need for Bilingual Education and the Proportion of Children Being Served," IDRA Newsletter, September 1986.

faster than the White or Black populations. The number of Hispanics and the proportion of Hispanic women entering the labor force is also increasing rapidly, so child care needs will increase as well.

A substantial number of Hispanics are at risk of early school failure, dropping out, or both. Studies have shown that early childhood education programs can effectively reduce many of the causes of early school failure and dropping out. In order to keep Hispanic children traveling successfully through the education pipeline, programs such as those provided for in "Smart Start" are essential.

The National Council of La Raza believes that "Smart Start" can be a important component of an overall strategy to raise educational attainment levels in the Hispanic community because it addresses a very important segment of our population: preschool children. As national studies have shown, early intervention is key to the academic success of educationally and economically disadvantaged children. "Smart Start" would:

- Make available to families who earn up to 115% of the poverty level early childhood education programs that would run full day and year round;
- Require that the programs be comprehensive in nature, addressing the child care, health, nutrition, mental health, social service, as well as education needs of preschool children.
- Require that the programs be "developmentally appropriate" for all children, including those with limited-English proficiency;
- Require that programs meet minimum standards, including a one to ten adult-child ratio, a maximum group size of 20 children, the promotion of active parent involvement, and the assurance of the physical safety of the children served;
- Require that participating states conduct a needs assessment of early childhood education programs; and
- Prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, native language, or handicap in the provision of services.

Recognizing the need for such high-quality programs, the National Council of La Raza is itself currently engaged in a national demonstration of five low-cost community-based educational interventions designed to increase Hispanic school success. Two of the five demonstration models are based on research that shows that early intervention and parent involvement increase children's educational achievement. Over time, programs dealing with preschool children must be developed as well as models for in-school children and youth, and the Council welcomes the growing national recognition of the importance of such efforts.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE BILL

While the National Council of La Raza supports the overall thrust of "Smart Start," we believe some refinements are needed to strengthen the program's ability to serve Hispanic children.

A. Services to Limited-English Proficient Children

The Council supports the current references to services for limited-English proficient children, but believes that some of the provisions should be strengthened.

The legislation stresses that the programs funded under this Act must be "appropriate for the child's age and all areas of the individual child's development, including physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and communication." This requirement is especially important for programs that serve limited-English proficient children. These programs must be staffed by personnel trained in second-language acquisition methods and multicultural education as well as early childhood education. Often this means employing education personnel that are fluent in a child's native language.

It would be a tragedy if, instead of providing limited-English proficient children with a "smart" start in the early school years, programs funded under this Act were to provide these children with an early start in school failure because of inappropriate language programs. Unless the number of early childhood education personnel who are trained in serving limited-English proficient children is increased, programs funded under this Act will not be able to appropriately serve this population. The training provisions of the "Smart Start Act of 1988" should be strengthened to encourage the recruitment of bilingual personnel and provide training existing personnel in second language acquisition and multicultural education.

B. Parent Involvement Provisions

Research and experience have clearly shown that parent involvement improves educational achievement. Given the low educational attainment of Hispanics, the Council believes that the involvement of Hispanic parents in their children's education cannot be simply a supplement to the educational program, but must be a fundamental component of the school curriculum. This standard of parent involvement should apply to "Smart Start."

While understandably not all parents can be extensively involved during the day in this program, since the legislation is partly designed for working parents, parent involvement opportunities should be available to all parents. Programs should have outreach workers who are familiar with the needs of Hispanic families; this includes bilingual personnel where needed. It is critical that early childhood education programs communicate with parents in a language and form the parents understand.

Because "Smart Start" is a pre-kindergarten program, outreach workers should also be sensitive to the concerns of any parent who is not accustomed to the early school enrollment of children.

C. Representation on the State Task Force and Local Policy Group

Both the State Task Force and the Local Policy Group are important bodies in the administration, implementation, and evaluation of this program. The bill mentions that the State Task Force and the Local Policy Group "shall be balanced according to the race, ethnicity and gender of its members." We believe the current language is too vague because it does not ensure the full representation of Hispanics and other minorities.

We recommend that the composition of the State Task Force and the Local Policy Group should be required to reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the affected populations (by state and locality as appropriate).

The National Council of La Raza strongly supports the role of community-based organizations as service providers in this program, and believes the role of these entities in its governance should be strengthened. These entities are often the most successful in reaching hard-to-serve populations (such as those who are poor, minority, and/or limited-English proficient), typically employ bilingual personnel, are located in the communities where Hispanic families live, have developed a rapport with the target population, and provide accessible and effective services. Currently, community-based organizations are only one of several types of entities to be represented jointly as one group in the Local Policy Group for the program. Community-based organizations should be assured full representation on the Local Policy Group.

D. Data Collection Requirements

Data collection requirements should specify the collection of information on the race and ethnicity of all children receiving services and the children on waiting lists for services. The legislation currently requires that data on the socioeconomic background of these children be collected; these statistics do not always include data on race and ethnicity. Such data are important for determining if Hispanic and other minority children are being adequately served, relative to need, assessing outreach efforts, and evaluating the effectiveness of the program's educational component.

VII. CONCLUSION

Since Hispanics are the youngest and most undereducated major population group, it is critical that the "Smart Start Act of 1988" recognize and respond to their needs. This legislation -- along with other measures introduced in the 100th Congress designed to provide services to preschool children -- is important because it has the potential of preventing early enrollment below grade level, lowering the dropout rate, and ultimately improving the educational attainment of Hispanics overall. The economic success of the Hispanic community, and indeed of our whole society, in the future depends on our ability to provide an appropriate, high quality education to Hispanic children today.

The National Council of La Raza appreciates the opportunity to present our views and we thank the Chairman for his leadership in this field. As always, the National Council stands ready to assist the Committee in whatever way possible to assure that this legislation is strengthened, enacted, and effectively implemented.